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ABSTRACT

Higher education must be prepared to establish goals and assess its success in developing students who can function productively in a future society. One possible goal of the college experience is to develop self-directing or internally-controlled individuals. Examined were selected factors and their influence on students' locus of control. Training programs which have been successful in enhancing personal control are discussed. Group decision-making models such as "ecosystem" and "organizational development" which allow individuals to take charge of the environment are also presented. Perhaps the most significant contribution student development staff can make is to model the behavior they seek to have students adopt--an internal locus of control. (Author/KA)

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LOCUS OF CONTROL CHANGE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS:

A FUTURE ROLE FOR STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

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LOCUS OF CONTROL CHANGE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS:

A FUTURE ROLE FOR STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

In an age of accountability and technology, higher education must assess its competency in developing students who are capable of maximal functioning in a rapidly changing society. Student development, in particular, must take the lead in directing higher education to the prediction of outcomes which are socially relevant and have bearing on life beyond college.

Some desirable goals are to produce individuals who are: resourceful, capable of ascertaining and processing information, making sound decisions, taking responsibility for their actions and perceiving themselves as causal agents in terms of behavioral outcomes. The last goal refers to the degree of personal control individuals believe they have over their environment (Rotter, "locus of control", 1966). Whether students perceive themselves to be in control of their environment (internal) or at the hands of fate, chance, luck and powerful others (external) is important to their functioning and self-concept. Locus of control is based on social learning and reinforcement theory (Rotter, 1954). It is a generalized expectancy (attitude) and one determinant of behavior. The other elements are: situational demands and the value of reinforcement.

Over the years, humanist psychologists and theorists of personality development have addressed themselves to describing the "fully functioning" or "self-directing" person (Rogers, 1951) and the "self-actualizing" person (Maslow, 1954) who fit similar self-perception patterns. Lefcourt (1976) coins the term "vitality" to describe those individuals who see a contingent relationship between their actions and the consequences that follow.

Internally-controlled individuals are persisters and action-oriented. They can laugh at themselves (e.g., assess "duping" in an experimental situation), actively seek and use information and are not easily influenced by others. Externally-controlled individuals respond more to social demands and tend to exhibit conformist behavior. Dyer (1976) in his current best-seller, Your Erroneous Zones, claims that at least 75% of the population is externally-controlled.

If one assumes that an increase in personal control orientation is a desirable goal of student development, background data about student characteristics and the influence of environmental factors such as instructor-related variables can be examined to determine their influence on this measure of self-perception.

A study was conducted by the author to determine the predictive validity of selected variables on change in college students' locus of control (McLaughlin, 1976). While previous studies had shown some univariate relationships between locus of control and academic achievement, sex, age and socioeconomic status, the results were not consistent and, therefore, inconclusive. In addition, environmental variables such as: population size of home town, instructor's sex and years teaching experience and the interaction between student's sex and instructor's sex had not been previously examined. A review of the literature suggested that these variables might have some relationship to locus of control. For example, the urban or heavily populated area often leads individuals to feel alienated or a loss of control. Characteristics of teachers such as sex and years teaching experience have been shown to effect interactions with students in terms of expectations and perceptions.

The significance of the study was twofold: theoretical and practical. A systematic multivariate analysis with a complete range of locus of control scores had not been attempted in other research. The identification of variables which enhance or impede change in personal control orientation and the use of such information in admissions, placement of students, counseling, development of special programs and learning environments was deemed of value for higher education.

The design of the study was as follows. The freshman class of a New England state college was administered the Rotter Internal-External Scale (1966) in English composition classes as a pre- and posttest at the beginning and end of a semester. This instrument has substantial support for validity and reliability (Joe, 1971; Robinson and Shaver, 1973). As all freshmen were randomly assigned to these classes, English instructors were viewed as a common environmental factor for the purpose of the study. The final pre- posttest matched sample (N=554) was used in the multivariate analysis. The change between pre- and posttest was assessed by using residual rather than raw change scores as these scores control for statistical regression. A stepwise multiple regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between change in locus of control (dependent variable) and the set of predictor (independent) variables.

Results revealed that there was no significant change in locus of control between pre- and posttest (means = 11.48 and 11.54). Of the freshman class, 50.4% changed in an internal direction and 49.6% changed in an external direction. The predictive validity of the three best predictors among the student background variables (English composition course grade, high school average, high school rank) was low ($p < .05$, multiple $R = .18$,

R^2 = .03). The incremental validity due to the inclusion of the instructor-related variables and the interaction between student's sex and instructor's sex was insignificant ($p > .05$, multiple R = .19, R^2 = .04). The construction of a prediction model is both a rigorous and challenging task. The variables selected for this study were shown to have contributed minimally to change in locus of control.

In terms of future research, a replication of the study with different samples and in different geographic areas might be useful. For example, more variance in age, sex, socioeconomic status and popuation size of home town might produce different results. The sample used was homogeneous in composition. There was a noticeable lack of minority group members which typifies the region in which the study was conducted. Longitudinal studies are also necessary to determine whether change is permanent or temporary. The author is currently following the original sample over a four year period. The recognition of situational demands, particularly for freshmen who are in a new environment, must be considered. The student who leaves college might also provide an interesting dimension. In this study, although results were not statistically significant, these students' scores were more internal than those who remained. Rotter (1975) claims that "age and increased time in the school system" can develop a "defensive external" (p. 65). This mode of behavior is adapted to successfully deal with academic failure. There are undoubtedly other predictor variables and interactions to be explored that were not considered in the present study. Different analyses of the data should also be encouraged. Those students who exhibited the most change in locus of control could be studied to see if trends appear with regard to the independent variables. The

multiple regression technique assumes a linear and additive relationship among the variables when a nonlinear and interactive analysis might be of value.

The previous study attempted to isolate some predictor variables that might contribute to change in locus of control. This is just one approach that student development staff might take in encouraging higher education to define its mission and set goals which can be measured. Before considering other roles for the profession, further examination of the personality construct and its ability to change are necessary.

How does personal control orientation develop? It was noted earlier that it is a generalized expectancy which is based on a previous record of success and failure. It is a learned behavior. Although early and persistent patterns of reinforcement provide the foundation (Rotter, 1966), studies have shown that as one copes successfully with difficulties, an increase in personal control results (Lefcourt, 1972). These changes can be measured over relatively short periods of time.

Change can be effected in several ways. The natural process of aging and the occurrence of certain societal events can alter an individual's locus of control but these are not intentional or planned. Intentional programs of systematic intervention have been used by educators, counselors, and therapists. Phares (1976) suggests that "change in expectancy can be achieved by introducing new experience that alter previous patterns of success and failure (p. 13)." Some researchers (Gannon, 1974; Johnson and Croft, 1975) have demonstrated that college students can increase in internality after taking self-instructional courses where goal-setting and feedback play important roles. Stephens (1972) claims that different classroom

techniques such as "open classroom" and "behavior modification" have as their goals growth in internal control and acceptance of personal responsibility. This illustrates that special programs and the development of learning environments can influence an individual's self-perception.

deCharms (1972) program of personal causation training for teachers provides one of the better detailed accounts of how this can be achieved. The assumption was made that treating people as origins (of their own behavior and outcomes) would help them in seeing themselves as causal agents. In actuality, showing by example how to treat others was the plan. The training program consisted of two phases. The teachers had a week-long residential experience which emphasized origin behavior: 1) self-study and the evaluation of personal motivation (i.e., affiliation, achievement, power), 2) realistic goal-setting, 3) action to achieve goals, and 4) assessment of desired effects. As defined, being an origin is to be internally-controlled. A step-by-step procedure which shows how one can convert motive to goal to action to assessment provides the necessary link between behavior and outcome - personal causation, perception of personal control and self-responsibility. In phase two of the training, teachers designed classroom exercises to be used with their students. Four major concepts were emphasized: 1) self-concept, 2) achievement motivation, 3) realistic goal-setting, and 4) origin - pawn concept. These were introduced for a period of 8 - 10 weeks for approximately two hours per week in the classroom. Results of the study showed: significantly more of the trained teachers advanced in position, students assessed them as more encouraging of origin behavior, and students exhibited more origin behavior including fewer absences and an increase in language skills.

Training manuals used in the study are available and are similar in content to an achievement motivation training program used by McClelland and Winter (1969) with Indian businessmen. This further illustrates that such training is applicable to different ages and cultures. deCharms (1972) shows that the learning climate to enhance self-direction is not one of "total freedom" nor "total constraint" but a systematic, planned program to teach self-responsibility.

Dweck's reattribution model (1975) demonstrates that individuals who view themselves as externally-controlled and helpless can become responsible for their behavior and persist in spite of failure. The purpose of the study was to alter the perception of the relationship between behavior and failure for a sample of "helpless" students. Two separate training programs were used and compared: a reattribution model which emphasized taking responsibility for failure and attributing it to effort rather than ability and an "enriched" success model with no programmed failure component. Both programs consisted of an intensive experimental problem-solving situation for a duration of 25 daily sessions of 15 trials each.

Dweck made the distinction between effort and ability attribution for failure based on previous research in which the profiles of persisters and non-persisters in a block design experiment revealed different attributions for failure (Dweck and Repucci, 1973). In short, the persisters not only took more responsibility for outcomes but attributed failure to a lack of effort rather than ability. The non-persisters, by comparison, took less responsibility for outcomes and attributed failure to lack of ability rather than lack of effort. The latter group is analogous to externally-controlled individuals who do not see any reason to try harder

as they are not in control and their behavior is not related to the outcome.

The results of Dweck's study (1975) showed that the performance of the students in the reattribution training program remained the same or improved following failure while the performance of those in the "success only" program rapidly deteriorated. The persisters also showed an increase in attributing failure to insufficient effort rather than lack of ability. Dweck compares the "success only" program to many of the behavior modification and programmed learning models. Do they really enable individuals to deal with failure by just eliminating it from the situation? The question raised is an important one and seems to indicate that a "reality" situation which includes both success and failure components must be used to shape and influence one's personal control orientation.

There is no doubt that Dweck's research is confined to an experimental situation and might well be limited. Follow-up is necessary to determine whether such training has lasting effects and can be generalized to other situations. The reattribution model, however, is viewed as a promising one in working with individuals who perceive themselves as helpless and see no contingent relationship between their behavior and the outcomes that follow.

Phares (1976) suggests that reorienting externally-controlled individuals might not be as difficult (depending upon degree) as thought, as they have been shown to be more susceptible to attitude change. This is especially so when information is introduced by those in prestige positions who lend support. The key elements for a training program or environment that enhances the development of internal control seem to be: a purposeful

structure, a consistency of reinforcement and the creation of an accepting environment where control can be taken in problem-solving situations. This has direct implications for the teaching policies of institutions and the programs established by student development specialists on the campus.

The American Council on Education Survey of Freshmen, Fall 1977, indicates that 44% feel they "can do little to change society". Astin's Four Critical Years (1977) which summarizes the results of this survey and compares successive classes of entering freshmen shows an increase for classes over the years who endorse this item. If educators and counselors are committed to developing students who can not only cope with a rapidly changing society but can lead and shape society, the mission seems clear.

Current literature in student development has stressed the role of actor rather than reactor, internal rather than external, as change agent, facilitator and interventionist. The locus of control construct is clearly related to the role of student development within the higher education structure as well as the kinds of programs its staff designs for students. In charting The Future of Student Affairs, Miller and Prince (1976) define student development as "the application of human development concepts in postsecondary settings so that everyone involved can master increasingly complex tasks, achieve self-direction and become interdependent (p. 3)." The need for goal-setting, assessment and the strategies of instruction, consultation and milieu management are components of the proposed model. These are the same elements described in deCharms origin training and other studies designed to increase personal control orientation. The focus

is on the interaction between individual and environment. Conyne (1975) suggests that information about the environment can assist individuals in "developing an increased capacity to direct and control it (p. 153)." Blaesser (1978) feels that student development programs require "intentional and systematic application of basic change approaches (p. 112)" to make an impact on higher education.

The tenets of organizational development also underscore the collaboration, involvement and participation of all constituencies in taking responsibility for bringing about organizational growth and change (Bennis, Benne and Chin, 1969). The emphasis is upon individuals increasing personal control by taking charge of the environment and structuring it to fulfill their needs. The interactive process that occurs results in personal development and change in organizational structure which means a more responsive environment for continued personal development.

The ecosystem model (Aulepp and Delworth, 1976) described in a publication from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) focuses on the "fit" and interaction between student and environment in achieving change. First, an assessment of students' perceptions of the environment is conducted. An underlying question that may be asked is: Do students feel they have some control? For example, is there a process for student input and evaluation? Students' perceptions might be examined to see how they "fit" with institutional and/or student development goals (if these do in fact exist!). In this way, students' perceptions can act as an evaluator or monitor of these goals. Second, recommendations for change are solicited. The students in the ecosystem model become a part of the process, involved and proactive. Third, the redesigning of the

environment or action component of the process is shared by members of the college community. Participation to effect change and fulfill needs is stressed.

The ecosystem model is similar to organizational development and reminiscent of deCharms origin training; a structured procedure leading from goal to action which emphasizes the individual as a "vital" part. The individual who increases in internal control is one who sees a contingent relationship between behavior and outcome and is involved in effecting change.

While earlier models for assisting personal growth and self-direction often focused on the individual (client as target) and occurred in a one-on-one setting, these models have advanced several steps beyond. Not only is the group process an important part and the environment the target but the interaction of all these elements produce change both individually and organizationally. This process brings potential for continued renewal and growth in higher education. On-going assessment and evaluation of programs is the vital link that accomplishes this goal.

That individuals need to exert control or mastery over their environment is not a new concept and one which has been recorded throughout history (often in the name of advancement or progress). Intentionally assisting students, therefore, to increase personal control orientation seems a desirable goal of both higher education and student development. Like the teachers in deCharms' study, student development specialists must pave the way by taking responsibility, treating students as origins rather than pawns; like Dweck design programs for those students who are non-persisters and view themselves as helpless and introduce organizational

development and ecosystem process and models on their campuses. This does not mean that research efforts to gain more knowledge about those personal and environmental factors that contribute to increase in personal control orientation should be abandoned. This function can be complementary and add to the student development staff's credibility as they assert their role as change agent in the higher education structure. This role requires the active performance of many functions. But, perhaps, the prime function is to model the behavior we seek to have students adapt - an internal locus of control.

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